CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGNATING MANAGEMENT CATEGORIES

Alternative 3

One of the primary objectives for managing prairie dog habitat on the Thunder Basin National Grassland is to provide for suitable habitat to support the reintroduction of the Black Footed Ferret (cite grassland plan). The Conata Basin had approximately 10,000 acres of active prairie dog colonies at the beginning of reintroductions. Based on population studies and modeling efforts, this has been proposed as the minimum size necessary to support a successful reintroduction of black-footed ferrets in plague-free habitat (Carnwath, 2005). Further the Black footed ferret recovery plan indicates that in order to support 30 individual ferrets, approximately 1200 hectares (3700 acres) of active prairie dog colonies are needed. (USFWS, 2006) In the presence of plague, periodic habitat reductions of more than 50 percent have been observed on the TBNG. Based on historical distributions and sizes of prairie dog colonies on the TBNG, one area of suitable size was identified.

The location for the MA 3.63 is based on the current and historical distribution of prairie dogs across the planning landscape as well as areas most suitable as prairie dog habitat as defined by slope, vegetation and soil characteristics as outlined in the LRMP.

Control and Management

Prairie dog colonies within ½ mile of private land/National Grassland boundaries, including inside Management Area 3.63, would be controlled using various lethal and non-lethal methods. Site specific decisions for rodenticide use will be made using the decision screen as found in Appendix B3.

Livestock grazing on the National Grassland would be managed to provide buffer areas of high structure grassland to deter remaining prairie dog populations from migrating from the National Grassland to private lands. This would likely result in reductions of livestock numbers to maintain high structure in a large area

All non-lethal prairie dog management tools continue to be available.

Land Exchange opportunities will be actively sought and heavily emphasized to reduce areas of conflict with adjoining private land.

Plague management dusting will be used heavily within the MA 3.63 to reduce plague impacts on the remaining population.

Prescribed burning will be used heavily to enhance habitat within the MA 3.63 to enhance habitat and keep prairie dogs within the MA to the extent possible.

Recreational shooting of prairie dogs will not be permitted within the established shooting restriction area. While shooting is not viewed as an effective control for prairie dogs, recent information indicates that it can reduce densities of prairie dogs within

colonies. Further, shooting has been found to leave prairie dog carcasses that contain high levels of lead fragments. These fragments could lead to secondary poisoning of black-footed ferrets if consumed. (Pauli)

Translocation of prairie dogs may be used to augment the MA 3.63 as needed. In the wake of a plague epizootic, for example, strategic translocations of new individuals from other areas into the affected area could greatly increase the rate of recovery.

General Management

Chemical control of prairie dogs entails substantial investments in personnel and funding. Based on past management history, neither available personnel nor available budget are likely to be sufficient to address all complaints of unwanted prairie dog colonization. Because of this, priority should be given to new sites of unwanted colonization (a new site being defined as an area where unwanted colonization has not occurred within the previous 10 years). By focusing on new problem sites, there is a greater likelihood of "nipping the problem in the bud". Sites with chronic problems of unwanted prairie dog colonization should be prioritized for land exchange, acquisition, or conservation easements.

Anytime that unwanted colonization occurs, vegetation management to encourage high structure vegetation should be implemented. This will typically require grazing regimes to be modified to prevent creation of low structure vegetation on or near the colonized site that would facilitate recolonization.